

## Missives From the Fiery Pit of Eternal Hell

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Remember when President Lyndon Baines Johnson spun an attack that never occurred into the pretext for escalation in Vietnam.

On August 4th, 1964, two destroyers under the command of Captain John H. Herrick, the USS *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy*, were on a secret intelligence mission well within what the Vietnamese considered their territorial waters. Herrick reported that they were under attack;

"The messages were vivid. Herrick must have been dictating them from the bridge in between giving orders, as his two ships swerved to avoid torpedoes picked up on the sonar of the *Maddox* and fired in the darkness at targets shown on the radar of the *Turner Joy*: "Torpedoes missed. Another fired at us. Four torpedoes in water. And five torpedoes in water.... Have ... successfully avoided at least six torpedoes."

Nine torpedoes had been fired at his ships, fourteen, twenty-six. More attacking boats had been hit; at least one sunk. This action wasn't ending after forty minutes or an hour. It was going on, ships dodging and firing in choppy seas, planes overhead firing rockets at locations given them by the *Turner Joy's* radar, for an incredible two hours before the stream of continuous combat updates finally ended. Then, suddenly, an hour later, full stop. A message arrived that took back not quite all of it, **but enough to put everything earlier in question.**

The courier came in with another single cable, running again, after an hour of relative quiet in which he had walked in intermittently at a normal pace with batches of cables from CINCPAC and the Seventh Fleet and analyses from the State Department and the CIA and other parts of the Pentagon. I was sitting at my desk - I remember the moment - trying to put this patchwork of information in some order for McNaughton on his return, when the courier handed me the following flash cable from Herrick: **"Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects on radar and overeager sonarmen may have accounted for many reports. No actual visual sightings by *Maddox*. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action taken."**

It was a little after 2:00 P.M. The message had been sent at 1:27 P.M. Washington time. Half an hour later another message from herrick, summarizing positive and negative evidence for an attack, concluded: **"Entire action leaves many doubts except for apparent attempted ambush at beginning. Suggest thorough reconnaissance in daylight by aircraft."** \* ...

...The president's announcement and McNamara's press conference late in the evening of August 4 informed the American public that the North Vietnamese, for the second time in two days, had attacked U.S. warships on "routine patrol in international waters"; that this was clearly a "deliberate" pattern of "naked aggression"; that the evidence for the second attack, like the first, was "unequivocal"; that the attack had been "unprovoked"; and that the United States, by responding in order to deter any repetition, intended no wider war.

**By midnight on the fourth, or within a day or two, I knew that each one of these**

**assurances was false."** - Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets*, pp. 9-12

Remember Operation Himmler

Remember the Reichstag Fire

\* "The area was searched, but no debris nor even an oil slick was found." - [link](#)